

# "Josselyn's Wife" and Its Clever Author

THE appearance of *Josselyn's Wife*, Kathleen Norris's new novel, fairly compels a consideration of the author as well as the book. You may wonder why, but it isn't very intelligent of you to do that. You admit do you not? that we can't have a woman writing one or more novels a year, with some ten books to her credit, and writing books that sell in the any old thousands, without a little serious investigation. Certainly not! Credentials, please, Mrs. Norris; and are your objectives all in order?

Kathleen Norris's credentials are her books, beginning with *Mother*, and beginning more importantly with *The Story of Julia Page*, published three years ago; and pausing, for our present purpose, with *Josselyn's Wife*.

## Mr. Howells's Explanation.

"Mrs. Norris," explains William Dean Howells, "puts the problem or the fact or the trait before you by quick, vivid touches of portraiture or action. If she lacks the final touch of Frank Norris's power, she has the compensating gift of a more controlled and concentrated observation. She has the secret of closely adding detail to detail in a triumph of what another California author has called Littleism, but what seems to be nature's way of achieving Largeism."

Of course this is the method of Kathleen Norris, the method in her madness, to use the word madness in its old sense of being possessed by something. What is Mrs. Norris possessed by? Why, the irresistible impulse to put things before you and make you consider whether they should be so. If a preacher might do that. Well, had most preachers the presentative skill of Kathleen Norris there would be ticket speculators on the sidewalks in front of their tabernacles!

If you want to make people think write a novel—but be sure you know how! Mrs. Norris does. Why, is easily answered. She was not a newspaper reporter for nothing. Newspaper training does inculcate "a taste exact for faultless fact" that "amounts to a disease," quite as the lifting lines in *The Mikado* have it.

## How Does She Do It?

As in a good piece of reporting, a single important idea or fact or problem is at the bottom of each of her novels.

Mrs. Norris never appears to have taken her fact or idea or problem and said, "I will build a tale about this." She seems always to be describing actual people and actual occurrences. This seeming may be deceptive. It may be that she goes about it the other way, proceeding from her idea to her people and incidents. If she does, the trail is covered perfectly. For the reader gets the sensation first of persons and "doings" and then, later, of problems arising from their relations to each other; which is the precise and invariable effect life itself always gives us. We do not think of the problem of divorce first and of our neighbors John Doe and Cora Doe afterward; we see Cora Doe going past the house and recall when John Doe was last in town and then, and not until then, do we think of the tragedy of their lives and the dreadful question mark coiled in the centre of it.

In other words, life assimilates all its great facts and problems and the novelist who would set them forth effectively must first have assimilated them, too, so that they will not have to be "brought in" the story he is telling, but will be in it from the beginning, disclosing themselves as the action develops. The reader must feel that he has discovered the fact or the problem for himself, that he, all by himself, has abstracted it out of the scenes put before him. He must see Cora Doe go by and hear of John Doe's last ap-



pearance and look upon the wreck of their lives—but all the rest must be left to him to grasp unaided! The real reason why no story can have a moral is that every reader must find his own moral, even if each finds the same one!

## Her Early Life.

Kathleen Norris was the daughter of James A. Thompson of San Francisco. The father was a San Franciscan of long residence, and twice served as president of the famous Bohemian Club. At the time of his death he was manager of the Donohoe-Kelly Bank. Kathleen was the second child in a family of six—three boys and three girls. Mr. Thompson would not send his children to school and they were taught at home, with an occasional governess for language study. In 1899 the family moved to Mill Valley, across San Francisco Bay, and Treehaven, a bungalow in a beautiful valley at the foot of Mount Tamalpais, became the home.

Kathleen was the eldest girl. At 19 she was to "come out" in San Francisco. A house had been taken in the city for the winter. Gowns had been ordered and "the cotillions joined" when Mrs. Thompson was stricken with pneumonia and died. Her husband died broken hearted in less than a month afterward. Misfortunes culminating just after the father's death left the six children "deserted, with the exception of the family home in Mill Valley, too large and too far from the city to be a negotiable asset."

The children had never known what it was to want money. They behaved bravely. The eldest boy already had a small job. Kathleen got work at once with a hardware house at \$30 a month. Her fifteen-year-old sister took three pupils "whose fees barely paid for her commutation ticket and car fares. The total of the little fam-

ily's income was about \$80 a month. Their one terror—never realized—was of debt."

Kathleen and her sister came home from the day's work to get the dinner, make beds, wash dishes and scrub the kitchen floor at midnight. Kathleen, who had been a favorite story teller all her life, began to wonder if she could not make money by writing. In the fall of 1903 she had attempted to take a year's course in the English department of the University of California and had to give it up because the family needed her. In 1904, at the age of 23, she made her first successful effort. The *San Francisco Argonaut* paid her \$15.50 for a story called *The Colonel and the Lady*. Mrs. Norris was then librarian in the Mechanics' Library and had more time to try writing. Such success as she had was not very encouraging. She left the library to go into settlement work and for several months strove "to reanimate an already defunct settlement house." She got her feet on the right path at last by becoming society editor of the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*. A few months later she became a reporter for the *San Francisco Call*, where she worked for two years.

## Marriage and Success.

In April, 1909, Kathleen Thompson was married to Charles Gilman Norris, younger brother of Frank Norris, the author of *McTeague* and *The Pit*. Charles Norris, now Capt. Charles Norris, U. S. A., is himself a novelist, the author of *The Amateur and Salt*, *The Education of Griffith Adams*. Capt. and Mrs. Norris, whose home is at Port Washington, Long Island, N. Y., have a son named after his distinguished uncle, Frank Norris.

Life in New York after her marriage reawakened in Mrs. Norris the desire to write. She started with short stories and had many failures. Finally the *Atlantic* took one. S. S. McClure read it and asked for several. He got them—and then it appeared as if stories by Kathleen Norris grew on every table of contents.

*Mother* was written in a prize story contest, but ran too long and was laid aside by the author in favor of another. When *Mother* did appear in a magazine five publishers besought Mrs. Norris to enlarge it sufficiently to make a book. She did the particularly ticklish job and did it well. After that there is nothing to record except her successive and successful novels.

## "Josselyn's Wife."

Which brings us to *Josselyn's Wife*, her latest. It is the story of Ellen Latimer, a country girl, who becomes the wife of Gibbs Josselyn, the son of a man of

wealth. A grave injustice will be done if we outline the events of the tale here. But the motivation is properly subject for discussion. Gibbs Josselyn's father has married a young and beautiful woman. It is she who eventually comes between Gibbs and Ellen. The affair is critical but by no means hopeless, and Mrs. Norris does not permit it to become so; a very honest thing of her. For these are cultivated and reasonable beings, these four of her drama, and the melodramatic is not the sort of thing they would enter upon. The crisis in their lives is rather fairly on the way to be straightened out when the senior Josselyn is inexplicably murdered.

## A Subplot of Mystery.

The murder followed a quarrel between father and son. The interest in the critical relations between Gibbs and Ellen is now distracted and intensified by the desperate situation in which the son finds himself. There is a murder trial. The great compulsion upon Ellen is to stand by her husband. She does it. The ending of the book is satisfactory and has the accent of reality. The solution of the murder mystery is startling, adroit and convincing.

And the whole book is invested with the curious quality that Kathleen Norris has of writing about actual people and actual events. In none of her books is the sense of this stronger than in *Josselyn's Wife*. It is an excellent story of her own most excellent brand.

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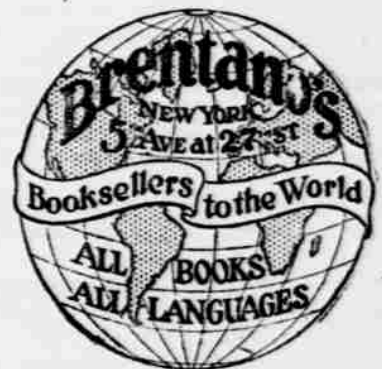
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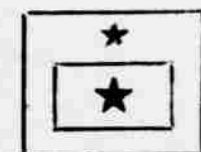
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